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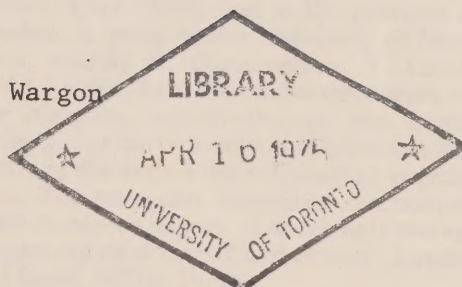
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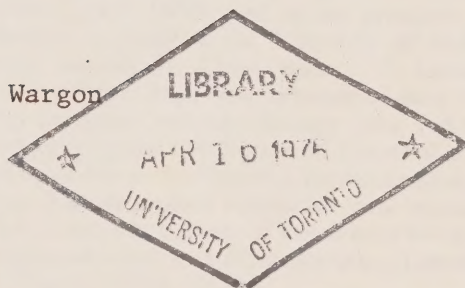
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The Study of Household and Family Units in Demography*

SYLVIA T. WARGON**
Statistics Canada

It is significant that some of the most fruitful contributions to family research and theory in recent decades have been made by analysts using population data and demographic techniques. Research on family and household units based on population data in historical and contemporary demography is briefly reviewed, and three reasons are given for the growing interest in the study of such units. In conclusion, certain data problems are mentioned.

William Goode has pointed out the contemporary lack of any sociological theory of note on the family, and has stressed the importance of empirical knowledge as a necessary prerequisite for "asking the right questions" and building theory (Goode, 1959). In this connection, it is significant that some of the most fruitful contributions to family research and theory in recent decades have been made by analysts—who include sociologists, historians and demographers—using population data and demographic techniques (Ogburn and Nimkoff, 1955; Glick, 1957, 1959, 1964; Goode, 1959, 1963; Levy, 1965; Collver, 1963; Burch, 1967, 1968, 1970; Laslett, 1969, 1970, 1972).

An interest in the study of household and family units has always been prominent in historical demography. This field, which has undergone a rapid development in recent decades in both its theoretical and empirical aspects, largely through the efforts of Louis Henry of France, uses as a basic method the reconstitution of households and families from early parish registers and records, and other similar historical documents. Information obtained from reconstituted families can and has been used to yield indices of fertility, mortality, etc., which reveal the demographic picture of a particular historical period, or of a particular population group in history (Henry, 1967; Henripin, 1954; Wrigley, 1966). In this latter group of references,

Jacques Henripin's *La population Canadienne au début du dix-huitième siècle*, provides a good example. Using the family genealogies of the famous *Dictionnaire Généalogique* assembled by Mgr. Tanguay, Henripin selected a representative sample from the French Canadian families included in this dictionary and on the basis of the data for households formed between 1700 and 1730, he was able to reconstruct the demographic picture of the French Canadian population, its nuptiality, fertility and infant mortality, for the early part of the eighteenth century. Also in Canada, H. Newcombe has pioneered the automatic record linkage of data from diverse sources for "family" research (Newcombe, 1969, 1970), and in the province of Quebec, a group at the University of Montreal, notably H. Charbonneau, Y. Lavoie and J. Légaré, have done substantial work on the computer record—linkage into family groupings of the rich sources of historical statistics of the early French Canadian population. The interested researcher can consult their numerous papers, of which only two examples are cited here (Charbonneau, Lavoie, et Légaré, 1971a, 1971b).

Interest in the study of contemporary family and household units by demographers is relatively recent, the greatest progress to date having been made in the United States, notably in the work of Paul C. Glick. An early Canadian Census monograph, *The Canadian Family* (Pelletier et al., 1938), based on 1931 census and on vital registration and other related data, predated, by almost a decade, the publication of Glick's classic essay "The Family Cycle" (Glick, 1947), and by about two decades, his monograph "American

*The writer is solely responsible for the opinions expressed here, and for any errors or deficiencies in their presentation.

**Demographic Analysis and Research Section, Statistics Canada, Main Building, Tunney's Pasture, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0T7.

Families" (Glick, 1957). Unfortunately, this early start in the analysis of Canadian data was not sustained, as the 1931 monograph was never updated. However, some treatment of the Canadian statistical data on families and households is to be found in the relevant chapters written for the *General Review* volumes of each Canadian census, and in parts of a number of 1961 census monographs, as for example, those on labour force, income and post-war immigration, which included the examination of data for family units, in addition to that for individuals (Kalbach, 1970; Ostry, 1968a, 1968b; Podoluk, 1968). Also of some interest are Chapters 12 and 13 in the publication "The Demographic Bases of Canadian Society" (Kalbach and McVey, 1971).

Over the years since Paul Glick in the United States pioneered the development and use of demographic data in research on the family, there has been a growing awareness among demographers of the value of population statistics and demographic techniques in the study of family and household units. In view of the proverbial importance and almost continual "lip service" given to "the institution of the family" in our society, it is almost amusing—and would certainly be a shocking surprise to the "man on the street"—to read the introductory words of the organizer of the Families and Households session of an international population conference held in New York in 1961:

It is the first time that, at an international population conference, a special session will be devoted to this topic. With this decision, the Union emphasized the necessity and significance of research into and analysis of families and households as a new but very important part of population studies. [IUSSP, 1963:155]

In 1960, John Grauman pointed out that, for the "further progress of demographic science," demographic analysis must move beyond the study of population in terms of age, to the exploration of population in terms of families and households, and "primary groups" of this type (Grauman, 1960). More recently, at a 1969 conference, no less an authority than Irene Taeuber drew attention to the "curious neglect" of the analysis of the interrelations of the family—which she called "the basic demographic institution"—with fertility, mortality and migration. According to her

All aspects of family structure and functioning—historic, contemporary and projected—are influenced by, and in turn influence, the distribution, structure and dynamics of population. [Taeuber, 1969]

An examination of a good number of the better-known and popular texts in demography reveals that most of them have covered, usually with great thoroughness and attention to detail, the three basic demographic variables—fertility, mortality and migration, the principles of their measurement, the actual measures to be used, etc. But family and household units are rarely presented in the same way: that is, as legitimate "areas" for demographic study. Nothing very much is said beyond that the family, as a "basic social institution" is important. Readers may therefore be interested in those demographic texts which *do* treat the family. Mortimer Spiegelman devoted a chapter to the subject "Family Formation, Composition and Dissolution" in the first edition of his *Introduction to Demography*, indicating that he was interested in the fundamentals in the quantitative study of the family (Spiegelman, 1955:134). This chapter on the family was updated and enlarged in a revised edition of his text (Spiegelman, 1968:237). Donald Bogue's comprehensive text *Principles of Demography*, which is designed to cover "the entire field of population study" (vii), devotes a chapter to "Families, Households and Housing Conditions" (Bogue, 1969:367). In this chapter, Bogue outlines clearly the past neglect of the study of human groups in demography, and the importance of according it a place in population studies.

Instead of dwelling further on these and other similar declarations, let us note here a few of the more obvious reasons for the growing interest of demographers in the study of contemporary family and household units.

1. Of prime importance is the fact that the study of family and household units attempts to examine the ways in which, and with whom, persons dwell and live in "natural" human groups. As such, it utilizes, besides the traditional demographic data on births, marriages, divorces, deaths, etc., of *individuals*, the information on household and family units collected by population censuses and surveys around the world. Since the latter data refer to individuals living alone in a dwelling (or, as Laslett puts it, "living with

themselves”), and to groups of persons living together (occupying the same dwelling), they represent *residential units*, and therefore closely approximate the more or less enduring “primary groups” in which most people live—first as children, then as adults—during the course of their lives.

There is an obvious and sharp distinction between statistics compiled on the basis of events and individuals considered as units of observation, and those for families and households considered as units of observation and this distinction must be understood. Population data used in demographic research have traditionally taken the form of aggregations of individual observations into population *categories*, as for example, births classified according to date of occurrence, or age of mothers, or individuals classified according to similarity of characteristics. On the other hand, the data on families as obtained from the enumeration of households in population censuses or surveys, refer to human or social *groups*, which originate in conjugal or blood ties, or their equivalent, or in decisions of unrelated persons to live together in the same dwelling. [However, it should be noted that the “traditional” study of fertility which is based mainly on annual data for births, or census data for number of children born to *individual women* eventually leads the demographer to the consideration of various social, cultural, economic, and residential characteristics of the family unit. Such characteristics or variables have gradually been incorporated into the measures developed for fertility research. Consequently, the fertility of individual women is studied according to the occupation and/or employment, income, etc., of the *husband*, the respective religions and languages spoken or other characteristics of two cohabiting *spouses*, the number and spacing of all children borne that a woman *with a husband present* reports, etc. The same can be said of the study of migration. For example, on the assumption that migration is not purely an individual phenomenon, but takes place within a family context, plans for the 1971 Canadian Census included the creation of definitions for compiling data on mover and migrant families (Gauthier, 1971; Wargon, 1972). These definitions were designed to study the movement and migration of family *groups*, and not just that of the head of the family.]

2. Secondly, the interest in the study of household and family units has received considerable impetus from the growing emphasis, over the last decade or so, on the view that the explanation of population growth and change, and of the relationship between, for example, demographic events and economic events, is really an explanation of what is happening *within the family unit*, rather than what is happening to individuals considered as isolated entities. This point of view sees the family as the primary “decision unit,” that is, the unit within which behavior-determining decisions are taken in regard to, for example, reproduction, migration, spending and consumption, education, housing, and so on. (Some “early” proponents of this view were Davis, 1959; Grauman, 1960; Orcutt and Rivlin, 1960.) Furthermore, the explanation of certain population characteristics (as level of schooling, for example), and type of economic activity (as labor force participation of married women), are increasingly sought in the characteristics and composition of the household and family units to which individuals belong, when enumerated. A good example may be found in the 1961 census monograph “The Female Worker in Canada” (Ostry, 1968a), in Chapter 2, “The Working Life Cycle,” in which the author shows the relationship between the double peak of the labor-force participation curve of married women in 1961 and certain aspects of the demographic composition of Canadian families, such as the presence and ages of young children in the home.

3. And lastly, the study of family and household units has attracted growing interest because of the work on the family life cycle. Paul Glick’s outstanding substantive, theoretical and methodological contributions to the study of the family life cycle are by now well known (Glick, 1947, 1957, 1965, 1971). It is perhaps less well known that Canadian researchers and particularly those doing research on the French-Canadian family were aware of the importance of the family life cycle in the thirties and forties (Miner, 1938; Lamontagne and Falardeau, 1947). The study of the individual life history and the family life cycle, that is, the systematic estimation of the ages at which men and women reach signal points in their status as adult members of society, family persons, household heads, parents of children, etc., and the


change in these and other life cycle signal points over time, constitute an important contribution not only to demographic studies, but as well to other areas of socioeconomic inquiry, of which the income and spending of consumers is an important example. To the study of families based on census and other similar type "cross-section" data, which give us only a "snapshot" or "still" picture, at one point in time, the concept of the individual life history, and family life cycle adds the whole dimension of time. Hopefully, the work on the life cycle in Canada will yield the kind of systematic measures which will permit us to see for this country the changes in the life history of individuals and of family and household units, and to gauge the implications of such changes, with the same kind of clarity and vision as Paul Glick, Andrew Collver and Jean Fourastie (Fourastie, 1959) have done for other countries and other times.

In these few paragraphs, I have attempted simply to provide certain very general ideas relating to the study of family and household units in demography, and to draw attention to a number of references which may be useful to the interested reader or student. One could say justifiably—as certainly the non-demographer would say intuitively—that the three reasons given above for the growing interest in family and household research in demography, are so obvious as to seem platitudinous, even trivial. However, there have been many problems, not mentioned here, relating to traditional data sources, resources, and to traditional methods and techniques of analysis in demography, which have delayed the recognition of the obvious. Norman Ryder cites similar problems in connection with the development of the study of fertility according to cohort measures (Ryder, 1956:46). As Irene Taeuber has pointed out, a good deal of work, and of interdisciplinary cooperation will be required if demographic concepts and methods are to break the barriers from individual to group analysis (Taeuber, 1969:518). It may well be that the solution to the problem of obtaining the kinds and quality of data required to advance research on family units or groups lies in the further development and greater use of sample surveys, appropriately designed and executed, rather than in the elaboration of the traditional "official" data sources, the census and vital statistics (Henry, 1963, 1966, 1968).

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